

Petitions Committee: International travel and covid-19

Activity

The Petitions Committee ran an online survey to ask petitioners for their views on how covid-19 restrictions on international travel had affected them and their families, and to gauge support for measures the Government could take to allow these restrictions to be lifted.

The survey was sent to people who signed the following petition:

[Allow international travel to visit partners and family](#)

Through the Digital Engagement Team, we have also run a post on online forum Reddit, asking for views on this issue.

We have summarised the key themes below and illustrated them with quotes from respondents.

Response

7,772 responses to survey

51 comments on Reddit

Methodology

Nvivo Pro 12 was used to identify and contextualise the most common words and phrases in responses to open questions in the survey. This allowed us to group and summarise recurring themes which were threaded throughout much of the responses.

In addition to this analysis of the data, Committee staff manually reviewed hundreds of individual comments and answers, using both subject searches and randomised selection.

Survey questions which produced statistical results have been included in the summaries of key themes.

Key themes:

Restrictions have particularly impacted extended families, with many missing important life events

- **73%** of survey respondents told us they had family members, not including children or spouses, living in a different country or countries. **23%** told us they and their spouse or partner live in different countries. **14%** told us they and their child or children lived in different countries
- Many respondents told us how they have missed important life events of family and friends, including births, funerals and graduations
- A number of respondents told us how restrictions had prevented them from visiting terminally ill relatives who had since passed away, and how this had affected them
- Several respondents told us how they had been unable to see their children as they were divorced or estranged from their partner

Quotes

Survey respondent: "I have not seen my son for almost 18 months, and I have found this extremely hard to bear. I live alone, so the lockdown has been particularly hard for me especially the most recent one, and I have had days of feeling completely desperate."

Family and loved ones are of extreme importance at times like this, and the simple fact of visiting my son being made illegal feels like torture.”

Survey respondent: “I am divorced and my husband lives in Qatar. My children have not seen their father for 17 months and I have not been to the UK or seen my parents and all extended family for almost coming up to 2 years this summer. My Dad has cancer and he is desperate to see his family. Myself and both of my children are suffering from anxiety and stress due to these Covid travel restrictions”.

Reddit user: “My parents and extended family are in the EU. I have not seen them for almost a year. I have not seen my grandma for 1.5 years, and unfortunately, she passed away a few months ago and I couldn't be there for her. I couldn't meet my girlfriend who is in my home country for almost a year, even though we were planning to fly to each other every month. I'm grieving for the time I lost with those I love. I've never felt so isolated and alone.”

Survey respondent: “I am a U.K. citizen & only moved to the USA in late 2019. Because of Covid & the travel restrictions I've felt extremely alone & isolated during this time as I've had no chance to meet people in my new country, and my family in the U.K. have not been able to visit me. I have been pregnant & had a baby 6 weeks ago all the while estranged from my family. My mental health has suffered hugely because of this separation, especially separation from my mum whose support I was counting on for the birth & post partum care for me & my children. My parents have never met their grandson.”

Survey respondent: “My [elderly] mother lives [abroad] and is very poorly, both physically and especially mentally. She is highly depressed, especially after my younger brother died in early January. In the past 5 or 6 years, I have been flying over every 6 or 7 weeks and stayed with her for 2 or 3 weeks - this was very important support for her to make her feel less lonely and also to do lots of shopping for her, sort her paperwork and all sorts of little things around her life.

Reddit user: “My family are based abroad, and I had planned to see them at graduation. A time for us to celebrate. These plans, soon enough were all scuppered. Graduation cancelled. Trips cancelled. I hadn't seen my family for over a year. All my friends had moved back home for lockdown, and the sudden loneliness for me was deafening. To add to the absence of family, the sudden exodus of friends, I lost one of my close relatives. I could not fly back to see them.”

Many couples have also been separated

- A number of respondents told us how they had been separated from their partner or spouse, many of whom are binational couples who have citizenship of different countries
- Many such couples are in long-term committed relationships, which are being negatively affected by their enforced separation

Quotes

Survey respondent: “I have been separated from my partner for over a year (1 year 4 months). The stress, sadness and wait alone (literally alone) for any news the travel restrictions to the US will be lifted is horrendous. He cannot come here (to the UK)

because of work commitments, only I am in the position to travel to him.”

Survey respondent: “It’s hard enough being in a long distance relationship, this is your partner the person you love the person you NEED that physical contact with on a bad day, me, personally I suffer detrimentally with anxiety and depression, when I’m with my partner it really helps, he’s medicine in human form for me, I was able to come off all my anti anxiety and anti depression medication in 2019 when we were able to freely be together, since the restrictions that’s nose dived and I’ve had to go back on them as well as therapy, this would NOT [have] happened had exemptions been made for long distance couples to be together, it’s extremely unfair”

Survey respondent: “I have been separated from my boyfriend since jan 4th 2020. He lives in New York and I live in London. We both have medical conditions that we want to be present to support each other through but he has a heart condition which requires constant monitoring and support. I have had extreme anxiety and emotional stress worrying something god forbid could happen and I cannot be there. We want to get married but cannot even visit each other’s countries to start that process. We will test, quarantine and do anything we have to”

Many respondents were upset that travelling to visit family or partners has been considered in a similar way to “bucket and spade holidays”

- While travelling for business purposes was allowed to continue during the pandemic, many respondents expressed frustration that relationships

with partners and family were not prioritised by the Government

- Many respondents were upset that travelling to visit their family or partner was classed in the same terms as holidays, with the same restrictions applying

Quotes

Survey respondent: “I myself live in the United Kingdom and my partner lives in Florida United States, the last time i seen him was February 2020, I suffer from depression and anxiety problems and after losing my child at 37 weeks he has been my support throughout and because I cant see him its affecting me, as the saying goes ‘love is not tourism’”.

Survey respondent: “Many countries have introduced “sweetheart visa’s” for couples in this situation which is such an amazing step forward, the UK need to introduce this, and allow partners coming from red list countries to quarantine with their partners at home with testing everyday to show they don’t have covid also no hotel quarantine for brits arriving home from red list countries”.

Survey respondent: “Currently due to extreme testing requirements (3x test to come back & quarantine) I cannot afford to see my family. Visiting family is NOT the same as going on holidays as naturally I would never do anything silly that would put my family at risk. I personally find it extreme having to self isolate and being forced to pay for 2 tests which are really expensive.”

Survey respondent: “My father splits his time between the UK and Argentina. His wife is Argentine and has children resident in Argentina. Dad has myself, my sister and 3 grandchildren who are all desperate to see



him. I haven't seen Dad since 13th March 2020. I understand why restrictions had to be put in place, I've followed every rule. Dad doesn't want a holiday - just contact with his family."

There is concern and confusion about the various requirements of the traffic light system, and disappointment that exemptions have not been made based on testing and vaccination status

- Many respondents were confused as to why certain countries with higher vaccination rates and/or lower case numbers have been included on the 'green list' of countries
- A number of respondents were unsure which requirements regarding testing and quarantine applied to which category of the 'traffic light' system
- Several respondents highlighted how sudden changes to a country's status under the 'traffic light' system had left them or family members unexpectedly separated
- Many respondents questioned why potential travellers' vaccination status was not considered a mitigating factor in determining whether they can travel
- Many respondents did not understand the rationale behind the requirement for a PCR test on Days 2 and 8 after arriving back in the UK from an 'amber list' country

Quotes

Survey respondent: "Flights don't allow NHS tests to be used as pre departure tests, which seems odd, surely the tests provided by our national health service should be sufficient,

and if not, doesn't that show a huge issue with the NHS?"

Survey respondent: "Why should I be forced to pay and do [an] extra test at day 8 if the ones at day 5 is enough?"

Reddit user: "My children are in the UK and I am in Indonesia. I last saw them in January 2020. They would expect to come here in July but it is difficult to plan for this because of the risk of change to quarantine/red list status and overnight huge penalty associated with red list status, particularly as unaccompanied minors with uncertainty as to UK hotel stay in that case. Due to transport time/distance, unlikely to be able to get back in time if any changes were made at short notice. Even if longer notice was provided, then it would still be difficult to plan, because return flights/availability would disappear/prices shoot up."

Survey respondent: "We are Brits living in California, with two young children (4 and 2 at time of writing). Our siblings, niece, parents and 3 elderly grandparents live in the UK, who we have not seen now in 18 months. We have been vaccinated, California has a very low Covid positivity rate (lower than Portugal), and we were very sad to not see the USA on the UK's green list."

Survey respondent: "The traffic light system needs to be applied more fairly and more systematically. It is essential to treat countries individually. In particular, countries in sub-Saharan Africa have been lumped together despite the fact that Namibia, Botswana, and Rwanda among others have had much lower case and fatality rates than many European countries. The US has one of the world's highest vaccination rates using the two most effective vaccines, Pfizer and Moderna - so why isn't it on the green list?"

Reddit user: "My wife and children (2yo and 3yo) went to Pakistan in March when the country was not on the red list. The flights were via Oman, which was also not on the red list... Without warning Oman gets put on the red list after she lands. Had there been some sort of warning system in place we would have known to avoid that route... Without warning Pakistan also gets dropped into red list, which was honestly a surprise to me considering I could not understand the methodology with which they were deciding. I accept we will have to deal with the hotel quarantine. Unfortunately, wife returns positive for covid and has her flight rescheduled to now next month. A transmission she got purely by her extended stay there which could have been avoided had she returned as planned via Oman. So here I am without my wife and children for more than 2 months, looking at 3."

The requirement that travellers have to pay for one or more PCR tests after arriving in England was heavily criticised

- The requirement that travellers pay for private PCR tests after arriving in England, which can cost hundreds of pounds, was criticised as excessive and exploitative

Quotes

Survey respondent: "I think it is excessively expensive. Seeing your family shouldn't be a luxury good but a [commodity]. This is the least of my rights. Having to pay for a Covid test prior departure I think that's the norm in today's age, but having to then pay a kit, and then an extra test after 5 days is over the top. Not all families have that economical facilities."

Survey respondent: "I appreciate international travel needs to be restricted, but visiting one's family is not the same as going on holiday. The high costs of testing are discriminatory and make travel impossible for people who can't afford it. The cost of testing in the UK is also much higher than elsewhere. If the tests are deemed essential, they ought to be free. Quarantine for people who live alone and work also makes travel impossible."

Survey respondent: "Fully vaccinated people should be able to travel without this many tests. The tests are too expensive. [Quarantine] at home should be 5 days only with 1 test which should be a lot cheaper".

The cost and length of the mandatory hotel quarantine period was also criticised

- Many respondents feel the £1,750 cost of the mandatory 10-day quarantine for those arriving from a 'red list' country is excessive, and discriminates against those on lower incomes
- The requirement that such travellers quarantine for 10 days in a designated 'quarantine hotel' was also criticised, particularly where visits are urgent or time-sensitive, for example in the case of visiting terminally ill relatives
- A large number of respondents want travellers to be allowed to quarantine at home rather than in such hotels

Quotes

Reddit user: "I have relatives in a currently Amber country. My children barely know [their grandparents] and we desperately want to see them before it is too late. But with the

testing costs plus the risk of hotel quarantine plus all the home quarantining needed on both ends it is just not feasible.”

Reddit user: “The cost of testing is still prohibitive for a family - not to mention the cost of quarantining for those who can't work from home, and the risk of the countries turning red with no warning and us being stuck in ruinously expensive hotel quarantine.”

Survey respondent: “Enforcing quarantines for those fully vaccinated when visiting family simply isn't feasible. People will spend the entire trip trapped in a hotel or a house by the time they have to return home. With limited vacation days and Especially those with children this just isn't an option”.

There was majority support for using the NHS covid-19 app to help enable international travel, however there was limited support for other measures which could allow restrictions to be lifted

- **63%** of survey respondents said they 'fully' or 'partly' support the Government's plans to require international travellers to demonstrate their vaccination and testing status using the NHS covid-19 mobile app.
- From a list of potential alternative steps travellers could be required to take to allow them to travel, the most popular was a '**self-paid covid-19 test prior to departure**', which **49%** said they would 'fully' or 'partly' support
- **44%** said they would 'fully' or 'partly' support a requirement that they take a

'self-paid covid-19 test before and/or upon arrival'

- There was, however, clear opposition to the suggestion of either '**mandatory quarantine in the UK prior to departure**' (**75%** 'fully' or 'partly' oppose) or '**mandatory quarantine on arrival, with early release after a negative test**' (**56%** 'fully' or 'partly' oppose)
- A few respondents suggested other steps the Government could take to minimise the risk of transmission by travellers

Survey respondent: “There should be a dedicated terminal for arrivals from red list countries so that travellers from these “high risk places” do not mingle with people from amber and green list countries. Under the existing system people from red list countries share the same toilet facilities, queues and are in the same passport control lines as those from amber and green list countries. This increases the risk of spreading the virus + variant and defeats the whole point of the hotel quarantine system”.